

SHAKESPEARE ON BEAUTY.

From the London Saturday Review.

The admiration that we render to the genius of Shakespeare is not all consciously paid. Perhaps it is, quite as often as not, unconscious. As with a great building, so with a great genius, wherever excellence or curiosity in the parts is lost in the harmony or perfectness of the whole, admiration is unconsciously or tacitly expressed. In Shakespeare, overpowered by his dramatic force and completeness, we often lose sight of his reasoning ability and his analytical sentences. No man leaves behind him in quantity so large an intellectual legacy as Shakespeare left, especially when the quality is rare and the variety great, without having put on record incidentally many marks of the detailed workings of his mind; and not only of his special intellectual processes or principles, but also of his tastes and sympathies. But who can say much on these matters respecting Shakespeare? Who does not feel himself to be better informed about the likes and dislikes of Falstaff, Romeo, Othello, or even Hamlet, than he is about the views and sentiments of their originator? The reason is that the genius of Shakespeare was not only profoundly dramatic, but profoundly faithful to dramatic requirement. And thus he becomes individually lost, lost doubly, in the completeness and the variety of his dramatic creations. But though lost to surface study and indiscriminating observation—lost, in short, to that hasty and unsatisfactory character known as the "general reader"—there is no reason why he should not be found, if carefully searched after. In other words, the works of Shakespeare do actually contain traces, more or less distinct, of what he thought and felt on a great variety of subjects, and by setting these indications side by side a united whole may be gained which tells as a good deal about his mind and heart in this or that. We propose in these remarks to examine now how he would lead to infer as nearly as may be how he thought, on the subject of personal beauty.

We think it was Lord Chesterfield who once described personal beauty as a "good letter of introduction." Good looks certainly do the work of such letters very well in a great number of instances; but the description will be felt to be mean, feeble, and inadequate. Shakespeare would not have endured it for a moment. He might have put it for dramatic purposes into the mouth of a calculating Iago or a cynical Jaques; but it is the last thing that he himself would have accepted as a description of beauty, for his thoughts ran altogether on another level. They may not be general acceptance just now. It is possible that they may incline some readers to ask, as George III once asked of Miss Burney (in confidence), "Was there ever such stuff as good part of Shakespeare?" But they are, notwithstanding, on a level which no one would be the worse for trying to reach once more. Beauty, in his conception, was, in the first place, one of the great prime gifts of life. He is continually given to rank it among these. He classes it with

High birth, vigor of bone, desert in service, Love, friendship, charity, with education, youth, honesty, worth, courage and wisdom. Like all of these, it is to be regarded more as a trust than as a gift. It may be misused and wasted, a thing which it is criminal to allow; or increased and transmitted, which it is not a matter of caprice, but a duty. Whatever view may be held about the Sonnets in general, no one who knows well that exquisite and difficult series of poems will have much doubt that the reiterated injunctions to perpetuate the great endowment of beauty by transmission, which abound in the first twenty or thirty sonnets, are something more than the expression of a wish regarding a particular case, and represented general and permanent persuasions.

Like other prime personal faculties or acquisitions, beauty is also, in Shakespeare's view, a power, and a power which is sometimes mysteriously powerful for evil.

Beauty is a wit. Against whose charms faith melteth into blood, It provoketh thieves sooner than gold; it often makes women proud, and men effeminate. On the other hand, it can and ought to exercise a sovereignty for good—sovereignty, because it is itself hedged round with a kind of regal divinity.

Beauty's princely majesty is such, Confounds the tongue and makes the senses rough. If it drove Angelo into insane and reckless villainy, it more often "reclains the tyrant," and wins "respect" and "privilege." It can shame the proud-prince into submission, and it can annihilate time.

A withered hermit, five-score winters worn, Might shake off fifty, looking but on you; Beauty doth varnish age, as if newborn. And gives the crutch the cradle's infancy.

We have so far spoken only of the relations and the influence of beauty. There is no dramatic poet who writes so clearly, so consistently (within reasonable limits), and so nobly as Shakespeare does about its nature and quality. Every now and then it suits him to write hyperbolically, as when the servant in Troilus and Cressida calls, not beauty in the abstract only, but the actual embodied Helen, "love's invisible soul." But Shakespeare's own thought and feeling about the nature of beauty was exactly the opposite of this. A score of passages show that he habitually conceived of it as a kind of semi-corporeal essence, the soul or vital principle of which is goodness. We do not care to inquire how far this was due to the higher influences of Euphuism, or to the mysticism of Italian poets. For, like everything else that he touched, he had made these thoughts essentially his own; and they had been removed by him (though at this time of day they may look almost too delicate for common use) out of the region of the transcendental and worked into the relations of actual and practical life. In Measure for Measure, the loftiest in some respects of all the Shakespearian dramas, the Duke tells Isabella that "the goodness that is cheap in beauty (in other and less apposite words, venality in beauty) makes beauty brief in goodness (short-lived); but grace, being the soul of your complexion, shall keep the body of it fair forever." Antonio, in Twelfth Night, mistaking Viola for Sebastian, and bitterly believing himself disowned, tells the supposed fair traitor that he has "done good feature shame":

"In nature there's no blemish but the mind; none can be called deform'd, but the unkind; Virtue is beauty, but the beautiful's evil. Elizabeth of York, in a quick agony of suspense while discoursing with Richard of her daughter, falls in the same breath of "staining her beauty" and "corrupting her manners." Troilus dreams of constancy, the embodiment of goodness in many kinds, as "containing beauty's outward, with a mind That doth never suffer that blood decay." And the lying death of false beauty is likened in Bassanio's lips to the display of borrowed tresses.

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